Muted Group Theory:
A look at *Fried Green Tomatoes*

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Introduction

Have you ever been in a group setting, whether it be work or just friends, and felt like your voice wasn’t being heard? Even though you were physically speaking, your thoughts and opinions just weren’t reaching them? If you have experienced these things, then you might be part of what is referred to as a Muted Group. Sadly, we live in a society where not everyone is heard equally. Well, everyone is heard just, perhaps, not valued equally. Whether it be because of race, gender, sexual orientation, physical handicaps or even age, there are groups of people who are struggling to share their thoughts and feelings with the world but are being silenced. This isn’t always a malicious silencing but it does happen. So, what exactly is a Muted Group and what do they have to do with Communication? Let me explain it for you.

Muted Group Theory

According to Griffin (2012) the definition of Muted Group Theory is “People belonging to low-power groups who must change their language when communicating publicly, thus, their ideas are often overlooked” (p. 461). When you first read this definition, it may seem a little strange. I know I found myself thinking, I’ve never changed my language in a conversation with someone else. I think perhaps, we do it but just don’t realize it. To clarify this definition a little, Griffin (2012) also says (quoting Cheris Kramarae), “The language of a particular culture does not serve all its speakers equally, for not all speakers contribute in an equal fashion to its formulation. Women (and members of other subordinate groups) are not as free or as able as men are to say what they wish, when and where they wish, because the words and norms for their use have been formulated by the dominant group, men” (p.460). Now, there are some feminist undertones in this statement that I don’t exactly agree with but I think the overall idea of what she’s trying to say has some truth to it.
She (Griffin) goes on to say, “Man-made language ‘aids in defining, depreciating and excluding women’” (p.460). Again, I think this is very true. For example, take advertisements. For years, men have been the CEOs of companies, Presidents of magazines and newspapers, ad agents and so on. They have decided, for years, what words would be used to describe women in their advertisements. They have been the ones creating and perpetuating the idea of women as sex objects. All you have to do is watch an episode of Mad Men or any movie made in the 30s, 40s, or 50s and you can see it. I believe that it is most likely men’s fault for the skewed view of womanhood that we have today. Now, I’m not saying “Death to all men” or anything like that. I am by no means a feminist but there is truth here. Just take a look at the world around you. There are places where women are still not getting paid the same as men. Women are still having to fight to get jobs in high ranking positions and so on. It’s 2015 for heaven’s sake. Women should not still be getting ridiculed for their ideas.

A modern day example of this would be Emma Watson’s address to the UN last year when she first introduced the idea of He for She. The idea of the campaign is to get men involved in the fight for gender equality. For years, it has been women fighting for themselves. Now though, it is shifting to a joint fight with men joining the campaign by the thousands. Her speech to the UN was fantastic. Everyone was talking about it for days afterwards. Unfortunately though, it wasn’t all positive feedback. Watson actually encountered a little bit of hate and nastiness as a result of her speech. These people’s responses were kind of ridiculous. Her beliefs are her beliefs. She shouldn’t be coming under fire as a result of sharing them. I feel like that’s a pretty good example of Muted Group theory right there.

Fried Green Tomatoes

In taking a look at Muted Group theory in this essay, we’re going to look at how the theory comes into play in the movie Fried Green Tomatoes. The movie takes place in two different time periods. The first is what would have been modern age when the movie was made, the late 80s or early 90s. In
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this setting, Kathy Bates’ character meets an older lady at a nursing home. This lady, Mrs. Threadgoode, begins to tell her the story of these two women she knew, Ruth and Idgie. This takes us back to the 20s and 30s. Ruth and Idgie are best of friends and run a café together after Idgie rescued Ruth and her unborn baby from her abusive husband. One night, her husband shows up with his KKK buddies and he goes to see Ruth. He wants to see the baby which she doesn’t want to allow. He does manage to get a glimpse of him and tells Ruth that he’ll be coming back for her and the baby. When he does come back, Ruth and Idgie are both gone at different events. He tries to take the baby but is stopped by the lady who helps them cook and look after the baby but he knocks her out. He makes it out to his car to be confronted by a bum who had a sweet spot for Ruth who tries to stop him but ends up on the ground before you see Ruth’s husband get clunked over the head with a huge frying pan or something. Next thing you know, a sheriff from Georgia shows up asking questions about the husband’s disappearance. No one admits to anything. Five years pass and he still keeps coming back, hoping to catch wind of something. That’s when they pull the husband’s truck up out of the river and arrest Idgie and Big George for the murder of Ruth’s husband. Big George, being black, was an easy target and they took Idgie because of her swearing that she’d kill him if he ever touched Ruth again. The judge ends up dismissing the case because there isn’t enough evidence and the movie moves on. You don’t find out who actually did it until the very end but I don’t want to spoil it for you.

Application of Theory

There were a few different scenes and circumstances in this movie where I saw Muted Group theory being acted out pretty strongly. This first would be with Kathy Bates’ character. She is a middle-aged, married woman whose only child has left the house so it’s just her and her husband. She desperately wants to put some spark back into their marriage now that their son is gone. Every night though, her husband comes in the house, grabs his dinner and sits in front of their TV watching some sports event. He doesn’t pay any attention to her and its driving her crazy. I feel like this is an example of
the theory because no matter how hard she tries, she can’t get through to him. She tries to make him happy by cooking his meals and so on, tries telling him how she is feeling, and so on but it is like talking to a brick wall. All he cares about is his baseball, basketball, etc. That’s why she spends so much time with Mrs. Threadgoode; she needs someone to care about what she has to say and how she’s feeling and the only way to get that was through her.

Another instance where I saw the theory was in the women themselves, especially Ruth and the other women around them. Idgie was a free spirit and did and said whatever she wanted. During the time period when this part of the movie takes place, women had only just won the right to vote. There was still the very strong mentality of women being seen and not heard and so on. You can see this come into play when you first meet Ruth’s character. She is very respectable and well-mannered, just like she was supposed to be. She was a good girl who always did and said the right things or didn’t say anything at all. That’s how women were supposed to be back then. Then she met Idgie and things began to change but at first, there was this kind of self-imposed muteness that all the women around Idgie had.

The last example of Muted Group theory that I picked up on in the movie deals with the colored characters. Being set in the time it was in Alabama, there was obviously a lot of racism and hatred in the movie towards them and towards Idgie and Ruth for being friendly with them. When it came to Idgie and Big George getting arrested, it wouldn’t have mattered if Big George was guilty or not. Because of the color of his skin, if there had been enough evidence, they would have hung him in an instant. Even if he had tried to defend himself, it wouldn’t have made any difference because they wouldn’t have heard him. The jury would have formed their opinions of him as soon as he stepped up to the podium and never would have heard a word he said. Women aren’t the only muted groups. Minorities also fall into that category along with handicapped people and children, in my opinion anyways.

**Conclusion**
Muted Group theory is a prevalent idea and issue in our current society. Even in our modern age, there are people whose voices aren’t being heard. People are getting shut down and pushed to the side by society instead of being allowed to let their light shine. It’s something I think we can change and it’s about time that we do something about it. Like Jesus tells us, “The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:31). If we as Christians truly want to live out the Scriptures in our lives, then we should be fighting for the rights of those who have none.
References

The Bible, NIV
